

Unsettling Resettlement

Examining Local Dynamics
of Refugee Integration in
the United States Amid
National Policy Change

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Unsettling Resettlement

Since 2017, U.S. resettlement has shifted significantly due to national policy shifts

My research has focused on:

- local dimensions of these changes
- impacts on resettlement services
- implications for refugee integration, especially in non-traditional resettlement destinations

Recent study sought to examine how national policy changes impacted local refugee integration via an Iowa-based case study



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Making sense of local refugee integration

Multilevel Governance of Integration

- Integration begins at arrival, impacted by support/lack thereof
- Focus on national-level integration shifting to “local turn”
- Most attention to *government actors*
- Role of non-state actors in integration not fully explored, especially at local level

“Shadows of the Shadow State”

- NGOs contracted by the federal government deliver refugee resettlement services
- Further devolution occurs to community-based refugee third sector organizations (RTSOs)
- These organizations play a crucial role in filling gaps left by federal policy constraints



The study under discussion included 2 Resettlement Agencies and 3 Support Organizations in central Iowa

Unsettling policy changes

2017 EO: “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry”

- Halted refugee processing and admissions
- Cut refugee admissions ceilings, led to 90% drop in Muslim refugee arrivals
- Resulted in closures of over 100 local resettlement agencies

2019 EO: “Enhancing State and Local Involvement in Refugee Resettlement”

- Required state and local officials to issue written approval for refugee resettlement in their jurisdictions
- Seen as a move to further restrict refugee arrivals

Impacts on local resettlement in Iowa

2017 Executive Order

Material Consequences

- Low refugee arrivals and reduction in funding
- Closure of some programs, staff layoffs, and loss of institutional knowledge
- Diminished relationships with landlords, medical providers, and other community services

“Our relationships with our landlords are gone. And we’re starting to slowly rebuild them. But we’re still not able to just say, ‘Hey, hold these apartments.’ We have no one who will hold apartments for us based on our word anymore. [...] And so when you don’t have the ability to say, ‘Hey, hold these places for me,’ you’ve got people stuck in extended stay [hotels] for two, three, four months.”

(Resettlement agency employee, Feb. 2022)

Impacts on local resettlement in Iowa

2017 Executive Order

Discursive Consequences

- Shifts in public perception, increased resistance to refugee resettlement
- RAs adjusted public messaging, “fly under the radar” to avoid controversy
- Business interests advocated for refugee arrival due to labor demands

“...We would go and meet with legislators and elected officials, they would be a little more hesitant to support what had always been a bipartisan program, that historically had...received tons of support.”

(Former resettlement agency employee, July 2021)

Impacts on local resettlement in Iowa

2019 Executive Order

- Time-sensitive & resource-intensive process
- Educating local stakeholders about refugee resettlement & advocacy
- Foment divisions in immigrant communities & between service organizations

“Because of the political nature of our state, there was a lot of emphasis on ‘refugees are legal, you may hire them, they have legal documents,’ and so much energy was focused on that, again, because trying to raise awareness of refugee resettlement, which ultimately was a disservice to Latino and other immigrant-origin communities who arrive without the legal privileges of resettlement status.”

(Support organization employee, July 2021)

Implications for refugee integration

- In the U.S., support for refugee integration is provided at local level through RAs and other supporting organizations in **a precarious system characterized by shadow state governance**
- Current structure of program is **vulnerable** to federal policy change, placing resettlement support services and **integration at risk**
- **RAs rely on non-government actors** in local contexts to supplement crucial gaps in funding, arrival needs, and integration services, especially in times of crisis (see Frazier and van Riemsdijk 2021; Frazier 2022; Frazier 2024; Frazier, Stark, and Rudolph 2024)
- In light of recent cuts and stop-work orders, it is likely that **non-government support organizations** will bear the brunt of efforts to extend and provide crucial integration support

Many Thanks

To the committee for your work and the invitation to participate today

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